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Fear of Small Shadows: Counter-Proliferation in US Nuclear Strategy

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Introduction

Since its inauguration in 2000, the administration of George W. Bush has brought about significant changes in US nuclear strategy. Traditionally, the US military has maintained a nuclear 'triad' based on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range bombers. This concept was expanded and modified in the Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), completed January of 2002.[1] This classified document outlined a 'New Triad' strategic concept, based on nuclear *and* non-nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems, and a revitalized defence infrastructure.

By incorporating nuclear and non-nuclear military components, the New Triad concept marks a departure from traditional strategic planning, which had hitherto placed the great emphasis on nuclear strategy. This change of focus is largely due to the evolving US threat perceptions brought about by the end of the US-Soviet rivalry. Thus while the Pentagon devised scenarios against which to base its strategy - ranging from peacekeeping to major regional conflicts – it was ultimately decided that only those involving nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons could conceivably pose a direct threat to the United States.[2]

Rather than a fundamentally new concept devised by a particularly hawkish administration, the New Triad should be viewed as merely a stage in the evolution of post-Cold War US strategic threat perceptions. The foundations of the New Triad can be found in the defence policy adjustments of the 1990s – including the heightened pre-occupation with NBC weapons and ballistic missiles in the hands of actors other than the former Soviet Union and its successor states. The New Triad expands on this, establishing linkages between US nuclear forces and missile defence. Thus it is not a completely new strategic concept, but rather an evolution of one dating back to a time before the current administration.

The Threat of 'Rogue States'

During the Cold War, the United States focused heavily on the strategic threat posed by the Soviet Union. The dangers inherent in the proliferation of nuclear arms to countries other than the USSR, with the brief and temporary exception of China, were generally considered a separate and non-strategic threat, to be handled by alternative, non-nuclear policy instruments.[3] Until the end of the Cold War, the US had primarily relied on multilateral non-proliferation regimes to deal with 'horizontal' NBC weapons proliferation, aimed primarily at regulating the supply of weapons and their related technology to states.[4] However, despite the limited successes attributed to multilateral non-proliferation measures, the realization that the US might have to undertake combat activity in an NBC environment was unveiled in two key incidents in the early post-Cold War period.

The first was the 1990-1991 Gulf War, which carried the implicit threat of chemical or biological (CB) weapons use by Iraq. This possibility was made all the more credible due to the extensive use of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons during the preceding Iran-Iraq War, as well as by Saddam's use of poison gas against Iraqi Kurds. The Gulf War led the US not only to undertake active and passive defences for its troops, but also to attempt conventional strikes to pre-empt possible Iraqi use of CB weapons.

One particular danger was the potential Iraqi threat of biological attacks against Israel, which one scholar has argued led to a successful Iraqi deterrence of an Allied invasion of Baghdad.[5] The fact that Iraq had 160 R-400 aerial bombs and 26 Al-Hussein missiles (600-kilometre range) filled with aflatoxin, anthrax, and botulisum deployed to four sites during the Gulf War, with the possibility of pre-delegation, made this threat all the more significant.[6]

The second incident involved the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1994. Revelations that the DPRK was using its Yongbyong nuclear power facility to fashion a bomb further altered US threat perceptions. While the probable development of one or two nuclear weapons was considered a danger, the

possibility that the regime might develop a dozen weapons only deepened Washington's concerns. Not surprisingly, reports indicate that the US briefly considered pre-emptive military action against the DPRK between 1993 and 1994.[7] This was judged too risky by all concerned. According to one estimate, the US and South Korean military would suffer 300,000 to 500,000 casualties, with civilian casualties numbering in the hundred of thousands.[8] In addition, regional allies such as Japan (which provided the US with forward bases) were reluctant to countenance any US military action which could prompt North Korea to hurl one of its missiles at Japan.

Counter-proliferation and Missile Defence

With horizontal proliferation now considered to be a strategic threat, US counter-proliferation doctrine was set to undergo a dramatic change. An updated doctrine was unveiled in Secretary of Defense Les Aspin's speech to the National Academy of Sciences on 7 December, 1993. He outlined a Defense Counter-proliferation Initiative (CPI) as a supplement to traditional non-proliferation measures. Counter-proliferation was defined as the Defense Department's "new effort to apply US military resources to address the threat posed by emerging nuclear, chemical and biological-weapon capabilities and their accompanying missile-delivery systems."[9]

The CPI handed new missions to the military. It would require improved active and passive defences, development of large area decontamination capabilities after suffering NBC attacks, improved deterrence against regional adversaries armed with small but growing NBC arsenals, and improved counterforce capabilities to destroy adversary WMD should that prove absolutely necessary.[10]

The role of active defences such as BMD in the counter-proliferation doctrine should not be underestimated. To be sure, passive measures (ie. the avoidance of NBC hazards, the protection of units and personnel from NBC hazards, and decontamination techniques to restore operational capability) do have an integral role in counter-proliferation. But active defences also play "an important role in a coordinated operation concept to reduce NBC threats by reducing the number of missiles and aircraft arriving at key defended sites...it may be possible to rely on contamination avoidance at key sites."[11] This point is reiterated in CONPLAN 0400-96, which is the current campaign plan for US counter-proliferation efforts.[12] With missile defences in place, the US would be able to "provide deterrence and protection against attack, preserve US freedom of action, and strengthen the credibility of US alliance commitments".[13] In theory, the US would be able to more freely undertake counter-proliferation missions against 'rogue states' while reducing the probability of successful NBC retaliation.[14]

While the Cold War emphasized a multi-tiered BMD system in order to limit the impact of a Soviet nuclear strike, the Clinton Administration placed particular emphasis on theatre missile defence (TMD) programs. The impetus for TMD systems can be attributed to the threat that short and medium-range missiles armed with NBC weapons pose to US forward-deployed forces, and regional allies. A TMD system would use a kill vehicle (KV) interceptor to protect a smaller area from far fewer incoming missiles from 'rogue states' rather than from great powers, (such as Russia), with larger arsenals.[15] It could shield both American and allied troop formations in theatres such as the Middle East or in Northeast Asia.

The Clinton Administration also oversaw the gradual if reluctant movement towards a national missile defence system, which would be designed to protect the US against small accidental or unauthorized attacks by Russia, or accidental, unauthorized or intentional attacks by other states to which intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) might proliferate.[16] While the Administration initially emphasized research and development, pressure for a more robust national missile defence policy increased. Perhaps the most important pressure came from the July, 1998 release of the *Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States*, which stated that new ballistic missile-equipped nations (such as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq) "would be able to inflict major destruction on the US within about five years of a decision to acquire such a capability (10 years in the case of Iraq)."[17] This dire warning, alongside the Iranian testing of a Shahab-3 missile (July, 1998) and the North Korean testing of a Taepo Dong-1 missile (August, 1998), created the impetus for the further development of a missile defence system. The following year the Clinton Administration signed the National Missile Defense Act.

Nuclear Counter-proliferation

While counter-proliferation was originally conceived as a job for conventional weapons, America's nuclear targeting policy has increasingly focused on such missions throughout the 1990s—a fact noticeably absent from most current discussions of counter-proliferation. The first indication that rogue states would be used as the main post-Cold War justification for nuclear weapons came in March of 1990, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) published its Military Net Assessment. At a period when the Cold War was effectively over and the Soviet Union had become neither friend nor foe, the Assessment cited "increasingly capable Third World threats" as a new justification for maintaining nuclear weapons. Interestingly, this analysis was based on a capabilities-based approach that emphasized the growing capabilities (both conventional and unconventional) of both regional allies and rogue states. This was quickly followed by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's June 1990 testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee, which specifically focused on the threat posed by the horizontal proliferation of NBC weapons as a rationale for maintaining adequate US nuclear forces.[18]

Immediately after Kuwait's liberation 1991, the first Bush administration released its Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP), which directed nuclear planners to focus on regional NBC capabilities. In March of 1991, the Joint Military Net Assessment identified the utility of *non-strategic* weapons for these post-Cold War roles, and recommended upgrades for the US command, control and communications capabilities.[19] These developments led General Lee Butler, then commander of Strategic Command (STRATCOM), to establish a Deterrence Study Group chaired by former Secretary of the Air Force Thomas Reed. The Reed Panel, as it became known, began a process of new threat monitoring that eventually led to the conclusion that expanded nuclear targeting was needed, even against non-nuclear weapon states armed only with CB weapons.[20]

While some officials were alarmed by this notion, nuclear war-planning for contingences in the Third World continued unabated. This was codified on 1 June, 1992 with Strategic Integrated Operating Plan 93 (SIOP-93), which was the first overall nuclear war plan formally to incorporate Third World WMD targets.[21] Meanwhile an updated NUWEP-82 and Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP), which directed the military objectives of nuclear targeting, continued to emphasize the new targeting options. These options were articulated in the spring of 1993 with SIOP-94.

While the Clinton Administration was publicly ambiguous on the utility of nuclear weapons serving as a deterrent against CB capabilities, military planners were under no such illusion. As the JCS's *Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations* states, "the fundamental purpose of US nuclear forces is to deter the use of weapons of mass destruction."[22]

To be sure, the Clinton Administration did attempt to undertake a major review of nuclear strategy in the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review. Despite the best efforts of Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, the 1994 NPR effectively codified the earlier views of STRATCOM. Said he: "When the results were briefed to Congress in September 1994, nuclear weapons featured prominently in counter-proliferation roles such as to 'deter WMD acquisition or use'".[23] Buoyed by its success, STRATCOM attempted to further reinforce this new counter-proliferation role with what has been termed the Silver Books - classified documents with plans for military strikes against WMD facilities in a number of 'rogue' nations.[24]

This project was eventually terminated, but STRATCOM's increasing focus on Third World targets was formally enshrined in the Clinton administration's PDD-60 and the JCS's 1996 *Doctrine for Joint Theater Nuclear Operations*. In addition, the military also began to implement changes to its strategic arsenal. The US Navy began installing the SLBM Retargeting System (SRS), while the Air Force began installing its Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting (REACT) system.[25] The modernization of these systems was an important step toward the complete modernization of the Strategic War Planning System (SWPS), the collection of facilities and capabilities that are used to analyze targets, assign warheads to targets and deliver the weapons.[26] It is important to note that in the process of SWPS modernization, the traditional distinction between strategic and tactical nuclear planning would be erased. The eventual goal of SWPS modernization was to create a revolutionary 'Living SIOP', which would have "SIOP generation in less than 24 hours and re-targeting of up to 1,000 re-locatable targets per day." [27]

The Bush Administration: Change and Continuity

The current Bush Administration has placed the counter-proliferation mission squarely at the forefront of US national security.[28] As the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* boldly declares:

> We must deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed. We must ensure that key capabilities—detection, active and passive defenses, and counter-force capabilities—are integrated into our defense transformation and our homeland security systems. Counterproliferation must also be integrated into the doctrine, training, and equipping of our forces and those of our allies to ensure that we can prevail in any conflict with WMD-armed adversaries.[29]

The counter-proliferation doctrine was further codified under National Security Presidential Directive 17 (NSPD-17), publicly released as the *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*), which outlines three inter-related components of counter-proliferation: interdiction; deterrence; and defence and mitigation.[30] Much of the sophisticated conventional strike systems emphasized in the NPR and the New Triad can be seen as the latest manifestation of weapon systems purposely designed with counter-proliferation missions in mind.[31] Rather than a dramatic departure from existing policy, the Bush Administration's changes should be seen as the latest iteration of a counter-proliferation doctrine that has since become a central component of post-Cold War US military policy.

That being said, perhaps the most significant aspect of the current administration's emphasis on counter-proliferation has been the clarification of what has always been left unstated: "whether these options were confined to wartime measures… or whether they also included the pre-emptive use of force."[32] After all, if multilateral non-proliferation measures and nuclear deterrence are ineffective, which is an implied assumption of the counter-proliferation doctrine, a *preventive* or *pre-emptive* strike becomes a much more attractive option. Indeed, the fact that the balance of military power is massively unequal between the US and 'rogue states' may only increases the feasibility of a pre-emptive attack since decisive retaliation against the US will not be possible.

However, the concept of pre-emption is based on the requirement of necessity, of an imminent danger of attack.[33] The Bush Administration has sought to expand the definition of necessity based on the unique characteristics of NBC weapons. As the National Security Strategy document states, "We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries."[34]

While still referred to as a pre-emptive doctrine, the Bush administration has in fact incorporated within the counter-proliferation doctrine the far more controversial concept of preventive war. While pre-emption is based on the threat of an imminent attack by an adversary who possesses sufficiently dangerous capabilities, preventive war is based on the threat posed by an adversary's *potential attainment* of such capabilities. In effect, preventive war is a pre-emptive attempt to weaken an adversary prior to a significant change in the balance of power. While pre-emption can be justified (albeit with difficulty) under notions of *jus ad bellum* and international humanitarian law, the same cannot be said of preventive war, which is commonly viewed as pure aggression.

While the US did contemplate preventive war against the Soviet Union, it soundly rejected the notion due to the normative stigma attached to such an action, as well as the infeasibility of successfully invading the Soviet Union. This calculus has changed in the post-Cold War period for two reasons. First, unlike during the early Cold War period, the ever-widening power imbalance between the US and the various 'rogue states' makes the successful application of US military power a possibility. As pointed out by John Steinbruner, preventive

war "might well succeed if practiced against a smaller adversary early enough in the cycle of weapons development."[35] This option was apparently demonstrated during the recent campaign of 'regime change' in Iraq.

Second, the devastation of the 9/11 attacks has reduced the opprobrium attached to what were previously unacceptable options. Due to the perception that certain actors cannot be deterred, preventive action became seen as an unpleasant necessity; a "rational response to the changed strategic circumstances that the United States now confronts."[36] This differs sharply from the Cold War, where preventive war was dismissed as an 'un-American' activity.

Conclusion

This paper has situated the current Bush Administration's nuclear strategy in the broader context of evolving US policy towards NBC-armed 'rogue states'. Initially, the US was guided by a policy of non-proliferation, or the denial of NBC-weapons and technology to these countries. Washington has since moved in the direction of unilaterally countering proliferation through the development of active defences and offensive weapon systems (both conventional and nuclear), and through the adoption of a more proactive national security doctrine.

Notes:

[1] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, January 8, 2002) (hereinafter the *Nuclear Posture Review*). The NPR remains classified, with the exception of a three-page forward and a set of slides. However, it was originally leaked to the Los Angeles Times. See William Arkin, "Secret Plan Outlines the Unthinkable," *Los Angeles Times* (March 10, 2002), at http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-arkinmar10.story. Portions of the NPR have been posted at "Nuclear Posture Review Excerpts," Globalsecurity.org, at http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm.

[2] Gilles Andreani, "The Disarray of US Non-Proliferation Policy," *Survival*, 41, 4 (Winter 1999-2000), 43.

[3] For more early US views of a Chinese nuclear capability, see William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program," *International Security*, 25, 3 (Winter 2000/01), 54-99.

[4] For a history of non-proliferation, see Henry D. Sokolski, *Best of Intentions: America's Campaign Against Strategic Weapons Proliferation* (Westport, Conn.: Praegar, 2001).

[5] See Avigdor Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons, and Deterrence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

[6] For more on Iraq's CB capability during the Gulf War, see Joseph Cirincione with Jon B. Wolfstal and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenals: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), Chp. 16; Amatzia Baram, "An Analysis of Iraqi WMD Strategy," *The Nonproliferation Review*, 8, 2 (Summer 2001), 25-39; and Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm*.

[7] Any strikes on Korea's nuclear facilities, or even sanctions, could have resulted in a second Korean war with horrific casualties. For a detailed account of the 1994 crisis, see Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Non-proliferation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

[8] R. Jeffrey Smith, "North Korea Deal Urged by State Dept.," *Washington Post* (November 15, 1993), A15. Quoted in Philip C. Saunders, "Military Options for Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Program," Center for Nonproliferation Studies (January 7, 2003), at http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/index.htm.

[9] Spector, "Neo-nonproliferation," 67.

[10] Barry R. Schneider, *Future war and counterproliferation: US military responses to NBC proliferation threats* (Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger, 1999), 46.

[11] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Operations in an NBC Environment*, III-13.

[12] Martha Clark, *A False Sense of Security: The Role of Missile Defenses in Counterproliferation Doctrine* (Washington D.C.: Physicians for Social Responsibility, 2003), 18.

[13] *Nuclear Posture Review*, 7.

[14] Of course, this does not take into account alternate means of NBC delivery, the ineffectiveness of defenses (as indicated by unsuccessful use of Patriot batteries in the Gulf War), and the potential for holding countries not part of a TMD system hostage.

[15] Marc Lanteigne, *Tipping the Balance: Theatre Missile Defence and the Evolving Security Relations in Northeast Asia*, Working Paper No. 34 (Vancouver, BC: Institute of International Relations, UBC, January 2001), 5.

[16] Wilkening, *Ballistic Missile Defence*, 7.

[17] This Report departed sharply from the traditional intelligence community's assessment of the ballistic missile threat. For instance, the November 1995 national intelligence estimate (NIE) predicted that a threat to the US would not take place for at least 15 years. The Executive Summary of the Report can be found at http://www.house.gov/hasc/testimony/105thcongress/BMThreat.htm.

[18] Hans Kristensen and Joshua Handler, "The USA and Counterproliferation: A New and Dubious Role for US Nuclear Weapons," *Security Dialogue*, 27, 4 (1996), 387-399.

[19] Kristensen and Handler, "The USA and Counterproliferation," 389. One upgrade identified was the MILSTAR/SCOTT satellite communication systems.

[20] See William Arkin, "Agnosticism When Real Values are Needed: Nuclear Policy in the Clinton Administration," *Federation of American Scientists Public Interest Report*, 47, 5 (September-October 1994).

[21] *Nuclear Futures: Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Nuclear Strategy*, Research Report (London, UK: British American Security Information Council, February 1998), 10.

[22] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations*, Joint Pub 3-12 (Washington D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 15, 1995), I-1. This Doctrine saw the need for nuclear weapons (including low-yield and precision-guided) for possible retaliation in regional wars. See Kristensen, "The USA and Counter-Proliferation," 390.

[23] *Nuclear Futures*, 14. For more on the disproportionate role and influence of STRATCOM in the formulation of US nuclear forces, see Hans Kristensen, *The Matrix of Deterrence: US Strategic Command Force Structure Studies* (Berkely, CA: The Nautilus Institute, May 2001), 1-23. This report details numerous STRATCOM studies that heavily influenced government policies throughout the 1990's.

[24] Ibid., 15. Silver Books stands for Silver or Strategic Installation List of Vulnerability Effects and Results.

[25] Kristensen and Handler, "The USA and Counterproliferation," 392.

[26] Hans M. Kristensen, *US Nuclear Strategy Reform in the 1990s*, Working Paper (Berkely, CA: The Nautilus Institute, March 2000), 5.

[27] BASIC, "Nuclear Futures," 12.

[28] See Jason D. Ellis, "The Best Defense: Counterproliferation and US National Security," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26, 2 (Spring 2003), 115-133.

[29] *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (September 2002), 14. This document can be found at http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf.

[30] NSPD-17 has also been codified under Homeland Security Presidential Directive 4 (HSPD-4). While the classified document has yet to be released, the public version (*National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*) can be found at http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-wmd/pdf.

[31] For instance, both the CPI and the NPR focus on shallow buried targets, advanced energetic materials (i.e. extreme heat, chemical reaction or thermobaric effects), hard and deeply buried targets, special operations forces, and capabilities against mobile missiles. See *The Counterproliferation Imperative: Meeting Tomorrow's Challenges* (Washington D.C.: Center for Counterproliferation Research, NDU, November 2001), Chp. 5.

[32] Mahnken, "A Critical Appraisal," 93.

[33] For more on the Caroline incident, see Anthony Clark Arend, "International Law and the Preemptive Use of Military Force," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26, 2 (Spring 2003), 89-103 and Mary Ellen O'Connell, "The Myth of Preemptive Self-Defense," The American Society of International Law Task Force on Terrorism (August 2002).

[34] *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 15.

[35] John Steinbruner, "Confusing Ends and Means: The Doctrine of Coercive Pre-emption," *Arms Control Today* (January-February 2003).

[36] James J. Wirtz and James A. Russell, "US Policy on Preventive War and Preemption," *The Nonproliferation Review* (Spring 2003), 113. Of course, as the authors go on to argue, a preventive war doctrine will unlikely to be fully implemented due to normative and practical constraints.

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